

Autechre  
Interview with Sean Booth  
by Peter Hollo



# PIONEER MUSIC

SEAN BOOTH SOUNDS LIKE HE'S JUST RUSHED IN WHEN HE PICKS UP THE PHONE — AND FOR GOOD REASON. HE SPENT THE NIGHT HOUSESITTING FOR A FRIEND WHOSE PLACE HAD BEEN BROKEN INTO WHILE THEY WERE AWAY — A DISTURBING OCCURRENCE BECAUSE IT'S SO RARE IN THE COUNTRY TOWN IN SUFFOLK (NORTH-WEST OF LONDON) WHERE HE LIVES.

'I grew up in Middleton, which is part urban, but it backs onto local farms and such, so it's a bit of both up there — old-school working class, I suppose. I wouldn't say I was a city gent; I mean I used to spend a lot of time in Manchester when I was growing up because it was only about seven miles away.'

He then lived in Sheffield (home of Warp Records) for some years, but when Autechre's other half, Rob Brown, moved to London he decided to find himself somewhere closer there. 'Rob's lived in London since 1998,' he explains. 'But in terms of working together, when we started out we used to live about eight or nine miles apart, and usually by the time we'd finished working it was too late to get a bus home, so I'd just walk. I'm kinda used to having a bit of a distance, but these days we're only an hour-and-a-half away from each other, so it's kinda like me living in London, except that it's ... not London!'

Having that distance between them isn't a big deal. 'We've always worked separately,' says Booth. 'The Autechre thing is kinda like a crew name — sometimes I do tunes and Rob really likes them, and they come out as Autechre. Sometimes Rob does tunes and I really like them. Sometimes we do a bit and then we hand each other the bit, or we're in the room together, and we hand it back and forth. There's never a set way that we work together — we do it every single way we can. We're

both interdisciplinary; there are no set areas of expertise. We do have slightly different aesthetic tendencies, and we're quite good at capitalising on those differences, but it's a completely adaptive process. It could just be: turn on one piece of equipment, hit a pad and go on with that sound for a while, or it can be sitting down for ages building something to use.

'In Sheffield I was living in a warehouse, and it was like, you'd get up at 11am, look out your window — all bleary because you'd been caning it or whatever — and there's just loads of people going about their business. Look out the back and there's this factory, milling, constantly — all you can hear is a bandsaw, just going for it. For four years, it starts to grind you down. It's irritating basically, constantly seeing adverts for products, and people going about what basically seems like quite boring business to you because you're trying to reach some kind of creative spot.

'I find it loads easier to write tracks out here because there's so much space, and so little contemporary culture — I look up and all I see is farms and trees and the occasional kid wearing a baseball cap. I've never drawn all that much from contemporary culture — I've always ignored it, or tried to. I like to have windows open and like to be able to see what's going on in the outside world; I don't like to have my blinds down all day.

Autechre's methodology encompasses every-

thing from analogue acid to digital crispness, generative techniques to intricate programming. It can be hard to pin down the sources in their music, but 2001's *Confield* certainly brought the algorithmically-generated structures to the fore. 'The generative stuff — some of it's process-based; a track like 'VI Scose Poise', for example, is completely process-based. That was a process made in Max [a program for creating sound-generating and -processing objects from the ground up] as a kind of sequencer, spitting out MIDI data. It was built just to run. It had various counters that would instigate various changes in the way the patch. We'd hit "Start" and listen to it, and if it did something wrong we'd change whatever variable it was that was making it go wrong, then run the process again. This was completely hands-off.

'Then a track like 'Uviol' was made using a sequencer we'd built that changed what it was generating according to parameters we set with faders, so we'd spend a lot of time building it very soberly, and then we'd spend a lot of time very unsobberly playing it. A lot of the tracks on *Confield* are like that — they're basically made in real-time using sequencers where we'd spent a lot of time making this thing that would generate music according to a few set parameters, and then we'd mess around with the parameters in order to make the music later, when we were in a different frame of mind.

'Draft 7.30 is very different, because it's almost 100 per cent composed, with very little playing or real-time input or anything. *Untilted* is different again, it's basically loads of different sequences all running together. We've used so many hardware devices this year compared to *Draft 7.30* – on *Confield* there are a few hardware bits and pieces, a few analogue sequences being used there as well. On *Untilted*, it's basically everything – bits of drum machines, old MIDI sequencers, old analogue sequencers, MPCs, basically the whole gamut of equipment we've had around us for ages, but used in slightly different combinations – in some ways more traditional, in some ways less so.'

Autechre seem to have gotten excited about going back to these roots after intensive use of computers and algorithms. 'The thing about a lot of analogue kit is that you haven't got that opportunity for review, and you can basically sit there and drift off into another world – just get on with doing the tune – and it's the same with a lot of MIDI sequencers. For me, a lot of interfaces that don't give you a screen to look at – don't give you a time-line to deal with – are more conducive to making music that's well-paced. Most of our best work has been made on non-timeline

sequencers. We still use timeline, especially for editing audio, but for working with MIDI it can be a bit stagnating. I don't tend to use the computer a lot these days.

'We do play keyboards sometimes – for beats and stuff as well. We have pads in here, keys, loads of MIDI controllers – basically our studio's just a massive interface, tables covered in input devices. I really like physical interfaces; when we first bought the Nord Lead, it was the interface that did it for me. The storability, and the fact that it didn't quite sound analogue, just didn't come into it. The interface was so amazing; I could get so much done in such a short time, compared to any other virtual analogue synth around at the time – and it also sounds amazing, for what it is. I just love touching stuff and listening to it; I don't like mouse control, controlling knobs and faders on a screen. I can still write stuff just inputting data, but I quite like being able to play it.

'Sometimes I'll just play the beats, and sometimes it'll be mad editing; sometimes a bit of both, or it'll be a process that's then been edited into something that sounds musical. A lot of the electronic music I hear these days seems to be people who only know two or three ways of doing things – they don't tend to vary their method very much. They're over-commodifying themselves in a way, like they need to have a big trademark on everything they're doing. It's very habit-based, and the kind of thing I

try to shy away from, I *tend* to shy away from anyway.'

It's hard to get Booth to talk about whether Autechre try to communicate anything with their music or whether they even think about the listener when making their music. For a member of a duo whose music has an immense emotional impact on many of their fans, Booth is reluctant to impute any emotional content, or so it seems. He is, however, a fanatic about sounds as sounds.

'A lot of our music is sample-based. The samples might not be immediately obvious, but that's the way we like it really. I'm into physical modelling – everybody is these days – but if I'm working with models I prefer to do it in non-realtime situations, or using devices that have been specifically geared around giving you very little access to the parameters necessary to control the model. It might sound counter-intuitive but it makes sense in terms of writing music. It really depends on what's available at the time. I'm really into modelling just as a science, so I can do it on a Nord and a couple of effects units; I can make samples that sound like breakbeats. Sometimes we'll sample sounds that sound like they've been synthesised, because they're so bizarre, and yet they're natural.

'I don't know that we've ever considered ourselves to be sample-based or not. I like the way all the sounds sit together. There are a lot of samples on *Untilted* – some of them obvious, and some of them not, regardless of your



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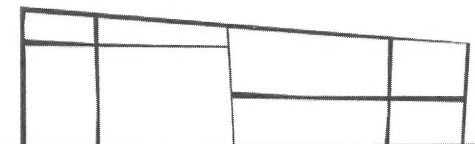
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IT'S LIKE IF YOU WERE TO TAKE A LITTLE PICTURE OF A MOUNTAIN THAT YOU HAD EMBROIDERED, AND REPEAT IT TWENTY TIMES, IT WOULDN'T BE A PICTURE OF A MOUNTAIN REPEATED TWENTY TIMES – IT'D BE THIS WEIRD PATTERN. THAT MEANS NOTHING ... BUT IN A WAY, MAYBE IT MEANS EVERYTHING.

history, because of what we've done to them. For *Confield* we used loads of drum machines and analogue kit on there, but that's the thing: because of people's perception, they kind of just stare past it. 'They're using a DMX on there? It can't be a DMX because the beats are going all over the shop!' Well, they're doing that because it's plugged into this delay that's being re-triggered by its own output, and the delay's from about 1983 too.

I remember being in a studio years ago. We'd met Daz [Darrel Fitton aka Bola] when he was working in a music shop, and he'd let us use some of his equipment. We were messing around with this Ensoniq keyboard that had this sound on there that could've been a

piano through a chorus, but it wasn't really – it was really obscenely bent up. As I was messing around with it, this kid came upstairs and was going, "What you doing there?" I was like, "I dunno, I'm really feeling this sound for some reason," and I'm laughing 'cause it was a preset, and he was like "Oh, what, *chorused piano*?" And I remember thinking, "It's not just chorused piano, it's fucking weird," but the fact he'd identified what it was, in literal terms, meant that I just had to accept his description of it. So many musicians I meet these days are like that – you know, so happy to have tagged something it is that you've done, or somebody's done, in a track: "He's just compressed his kick drum." And you're going, "He's not just done that; I

mean what compressor is he using? That sounds fucking weird, have you heard the attack time on that?" There's more anal things to be said about it sometimes.

A lot of the time it's because we don't advertise our methods very much. When we do they're really transparent, but often you don't really realise what the source is of what you're listening to – that's not the point of what we're doing. We're trying to just make things be what they are. It's like if you were to take a little picture of a mountain that you had embroidered, and repeat it twenty times, it wouldn't be a picture of a mountain repeated twenty times – it'd be this weird pattern. That means nothing ... but in a way, maybe it means everything. If

Autechre's music is about anything, it's about pushing the boundaries, making the familiar unfamiliar, and maybe repeated embroidered mountains is the perfect metaphor.

I mean, context – it's one of those weird things. I've never understood how people hear what we do. It's like chucking rocks in a pool, looking at reactions to what we do – it's strange. Some people say, "It's really great," and some say, "I fucking hate this, what's all the fuss about?" Well it's like "fuss" ... at least someone's making a fuss.



Autechre's splendidly named album *Untilted* is out now on Warp through Inertia

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